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Political Knowledge and Participation Among Young Canadians and Americans

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SUMMARY

Political knowledge is a democratic value. It is also an important ingredient in democratic citizenship, influencing public attitudes and opinions and, thus, political behaviour. From existing studies we have learned that political knowledge tends to affect the number of beliefs individuals have, making it easier to decide on issues and to clarify behavioural intentions. But there remains a gaping hole when it comes to comparative, international studies.

For the last decade Henry Milner has been working on developing indicators for comparing levels of political knowledge in mature democracies and linking these to political participation. He has shown that when we compare countries as to the proportion of their citizens with the minimum levels of political knowledge needed to make effective political choices (civic literacy), we find good evidence that the positive relationship between political participation and political knowledge holds for countries as well for individuals.

As voter turnout and other forms of conventional democratic participation have recently declined, especially among young people and quite acutely in Canada, this relationship has become critical. A previous IRPP study by Milner (2005) shows that political knowledge, or the lack of it, was central to this decline. But the lack of cross-national data inhibited drawing clear prescriptions for action – except for the need for comparative survey data on political knowledge.

If political knowledge is an important determinant of political participation, we need aggregate indicators to be able to test the effects on political knowledge of various policy and institutional choices. This applies especially to the political participation of young people. Youth political participation levels have declined in recent decades in almost all Western democracies, but the degree varies considerably across nations. Hence the phenomenon is both generational and contextual; that is, it is a consequence of national institutions and policy choices. To disentangle these, the first step is to survey young people in two or more comparable societies using a common set of political knowledge questions. Henry Milner begins to take up this challenge in this paper with an analysis of the results of the initial application of a set of political knowledge questions designed to be used in Canada and the United States. The resulting questionnaires allowed for 8 possible correct political knowledge answers for US respondents, and 10 for Canadians, 7 of which are common to both. It is this combined score out of 7 that serves as the main indicator of political knowledge.

These were included in two recent surveys focusing on young people. One was carried out in the United States in May 2006 with 1,765 respondents, of whom 1,209 were aged 15 to 25. The other was carried out in Canada in September 2006 (and is being reported for the first time here), with 1,354 respondents, of whom 877 were aged 15 to 25. Apart from the political knowledge questions, 60 questions dealt with various forms of unconventional and unconventional political participation, media use, civic education, voluntary association participation, as well as relevant attitudes to political parties, the role of government, and so on.

The starting point of a comparative analysis of political knowledge in Canada – as in other aspects of culture, values and attitudes – is with the United States, given how much this country is affected by American developments. The exceptional opportunity of including common questions related to political knowledge in youth surveys in the two countries was thus one not to be ignored. While

Canadian studies of youth political engagement have been much influenced by American findings and priorities, few replicate the actual survey questions and sampling methodology, and none include common political knowledge questions. Beyond providing a rare chance to assess what young Canadians know about politics compared with their American peers, the combined surveys make it possible to ask whether the American approach to tackling low levels of youth turnout is indeed appropriate for Canada.

Young Canadians' political knowledge is low – only slightly higher than the level of their American counterparts and, therefore, low compared with Europe. This suggests that European nations are better at disseminating the information and skills needed to turn its young people into participating citizens, and raises the question of whether Canadians should look there, rather than to the United States, in seeking to address the issue.

Milner concludes that emulating the stress in the US on involvement in nonpartisan voluntary group activities as we seem to be doing could prove less effective than an alternative approach taken by high civic literacy countries in Europe, whereby political knowledge is regarded as the basis of meaningful political participation. It stresses measures that raise the level of political knowledge by making the environment of young people rich in political information, targeting especially those lacking the resources to gain access to it on their own. It looks to government programs in education, media support, political party financing, information dissemination, and so on, and, unlike the US, does not try to isolate civic education from partisan politics.

Political Knowledge and Participation Among Young Canadians and Americans[1]

Henry Milner

INTRODUCTION

For the past decade I have been working on developing indicators for comparing levels of political knowledge in mature democracies and linking these to political participation. Political knowledge is a vital aspect of democratic citizenship. We know there is a strong relationship between levels of political knowledge and consistency between policy preferences and vote choice (Andersen et al 2001). Indeed, the accumulating evidence suggests a clear link between political knowledge and the quality of democratic representation and accountability of office holders.[2] As far as participation is concerned, not only are better informed individuals more likely to vote and otherwise take part in politics,[3] but the positive relationship between political knowledge and voter turnout is reproduced cross-nationally. Put otherwise, when we compare countries as to civic literacy, that is, the proportion of their citizens with the minimum levels of political knowledge needed to make effective political choices, we find a close positive relationship between levels of civic literacy and rates of political participation (Milner 2002).

This relationship is becoming critical, since voter turnout and other forms of conventional democratic participation have declined in recent years, especially in Canada. Moreover, as the 2000 Canadian Election Study (CES) reported, most of the decline in turnout (from 75 percent in 1988 to 61 percent 2000) was attributable to generational replacement (Blais et al 2002:49). A study carried out by Elections Canada found that 38.7 percent of eligible first-time electors voted in 2004. In contrast, turnout for those over 30 was close to 70 percent.[4]

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[1] The research on which this paper is based was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Grant number 419-2004-0028. The Council's support is gratefully acknowledged.

[2] According to Althaus (1998: 555), "one in five policy questions might have a different collective preference if everyone were equally well informed about politics".

[3] This has been established in surveys of reported turnout in every country which include political knowledge questions. The best known and still probably the most comprehensive such study is that in the US by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). Their definition of political knowledge as "the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996:1) serves the purposes of this paper.

[4] Reported in *Electoral Insight*, February 2005 Elections Canada. The study was based on a sample of 95,000 voters drawn from electoral districts in every province and territory. The turnout for the same group was estimated from survey data at 22.4 percent in 2000 by Pammett and LeDuc (2003:20), an estimate that was probably too low perhaps because the authors over-corrected for over-reporting. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that 2004 saw an improvement over 2000; moreover, this seems to have continued into the 2006 election. In 2004, turnout was higher among first time voters (18-21.5 years old) than among those 21.5 to 24 years old (O'Neill 2007). Clearly the rise was due at least in part to the extra efforts made to register and mobilize this group in the intervening years (see below). Note that we cannot presume that the trend will continue, since the high-voting cohorts will be leaving the electorate in the years to come.

In a recent paper I addressed the phenomenon of declining turnout among young Canadians (Milner 2005).[5] I concluded that political knowledge, or the lack of it, was an important factor in this decline.[6] With youth political participation levels declining in recent decades in almost all western democracies – though the degree varies considerably across nations (Franklin 2004) – there is no lack of parallel survey data from other countries indicating a clear relationship between declining turnout by the young and declining political knowledge and attentiveness on their part.[7] But, with one partial exception, the questions and methodology differ in these various surveys, inhibiting our capacity to draw clear prescriptions for addressing low political knowledge among young people.

The exception is the 2002 National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey, which assessed the knowledge of political geography of 3,250 young adults in nine advanced industrial democracies plus Mexico. Among the nine, the United States is at the bottom, with an average of 23 correct answers of a possible 56, followed by Canada at 27 and the UK at 28. Sweden led – with 40 – and Germany and Italy followed with 38. As expected, as a rule, countries with higher turnout performed better. But the study does not allow us to link the differences in knowledge levels with other factors that may explain these differences. Moreover, familiarity with international political geography is at best an indirect indicator of one's level of the knowledge needed to participate effectively in national politics.

The absence of such data, though understandable given the difficulty of arriving at questions about national politics that are applicable cross-nationally,[8] is unfortunate if we wish to understand and address the low level of political knowledge. It is especially the case here for, despite slight improvements in recent years, Canada, from what we know from the limited comparative data, ranks near the bottom in youth turnout among advanced democracies, along with the UK and the US (Milner 2005). As we shall see below, there has been much discussion in the US as to how to address the issue of youth participation. And, as in other areas, the Canadian approach has been much influenced by American developments.

But how appropriate for Canada is the American approach? To adequately answer this question we need comparable data; and such data has been in short supply. This paper begins to overcome this deficiency. It is based on data from two surveys, at the core of which is a set of political knowledge questions designed to be used cross-nationally. Both surveys focused on young people: one was carried out in the United States, the other in Canada. The originality of this study lies in the fact that respondents in both countries responded to the same questions, both those testing political knowledge, and those getting at the causes or consequences of low levels of political knowledge. In thus asking whether the American approach to preparing young people for citizenship is appropriate for Canada, we are able to take into account the effects of differences in institutions plus those of intervening variables such as the media use, voluntary group involvement and civic education, as well as differences in relevant attitudes towards politics.

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[5] In two other papers I brought the knowledge dimension into an analysis of the effect on voting turnout of Canada's electoral system and unfixed voting dates (Milner 2004; 2005a).

[6] See also Gidengil et al. (2003) and Archer and Wesley (2006).

[7] See, e.g.,Chiche and Haegel (2002), Holmberg and Oscarsson (2004), and Goul Andersen and Hoff (2001).

[8] Researching political knowledge comparatively is difficult – and is therefore seldom carried out. Though political knowledge questions are more frequently included in recent surveys, the tendency has been to disregard the comparative dimension. A case in point: the CSES (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) expects participating teams conducting the national election surveys to include in their surveys at least three political knowledge questions, but does not specify their content.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

It is generally accepted that compared to previous generations arriving at voting age, young American citizens are today less likely to see voting as a civic duty and to pay attention to politics.[9] A useful comprehensive portrayal of the situation is provided by Wattenberg (2007). Nevertheless, there is an important difference among American observers as to the appropriate means of addressing – or indeed comprehending – the situation. Wattenberg's pessimistic assessment is challenged notably by his colleague at the University of California, Irvine, Russell Dalton (2006), who suggests that critics have missed the "good news" about the engaged citizenship of young Americans. Such engaged citizenship takes the form of "repertoires" of attitudes associated, for example, with "forming one's opinion," "supporting the worse off," "understanding others," and "being active in voluntary associations." Clearly, an approach that takes such attitudes as indicators (as opposed to one that emphasizes attentiveness to politics – as does Wattenberg and as do we) is likely to produce a more positive portrait of youth political participation, since, in effect, it costlessly invites respondents to place themselves in a positive light.

Moreover, there is an institutional dimension to taking this approach that makes it especially problematic for comparative analysis. American observers tend to place great emphasis on repertoires associated with involvement in a voluntary or service organization as an indicator of political engagment. The problem is that in the United States, more than in other comparable countries, including Canada,[10] there are powerful institutionalized incentives in operation.[11] In many American schools and colleges such activity is obligatory rather than voluntary. Such institutional incentives must be taken into account in comparative analyses of survey data about asking young people about participation in such activities – just as comparative assessments of voter turnout take compulsory voting into account.[12]

For these reasons, our study comparing young people in the US and Canada treats involvement in voluntary associations not as an indicator of political participation but as a possible predictor of both conventional and unconventional forms of such participation in comparison with media use, civic education, and party identification. Thus, it allows us to test for differences in the relative effects of voluntary group participation on informed political participation among young people in the two countries, and whether other

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[9] These phenomena are related, since, with the decline in civic duty, the effects of political knowledge loom larger in the decision of whether or not to vote. And disseminating information lends itself to public policy measures more readily than instilling civic duty.

[10] This seems to be becoming more frequent in Canada. For example, grade 10 civics students in Ontario are now required to undertake voluntary activity. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/canworld910curr.pdf.).

[11] A recent study of young people in four US high schools found "a single theme about the meaning of civic engagement [that] appeared repeatedly: 'resume padding'.... Young people of all class strata, races, and ethnic backgrounds told us that they needed "something" to put on their resumes..." (Friedland and Morimoto 2006:32). This explains in good part the fact that twice as many of the 57 percent of grade 12 students who reported doing volunteer scored satisfactory or better (34 to 16) than the 43 percent who did not in the (difficult) NAEP test of proficiency in civics (NCES 1999:101).

[12] A specific institutional factor that must be taken into account when comparing involvement in the voluntary activities on American campuses that take a more explicitly political form, is the system of voter registration. A good part of such activities is directed at students registering themselves and others to vote (see AASCU 2006), efforts superfluous in almost all comparable democracies including Canada where registration is passive.

factors – and hence strategies for confronting the problem – are more salient in Canada than in the US. The term *informed* political participation is chosen deliberately to reflect our stress on political participation as an expression of a knowledgeable political choice, rather than a response to institutionalized incentives. From this perspective, making voting compulsory, with a threat of fines, is of little value if it does nothing other than bring uninformed citizens to the ballot box.[13]

In operationalizing informed political participation, we here emphasize the *informed* (political knowledge) aspect rather than the *participation* (reported voting) aspect, because of the subjectivity and culture-boundedness of the latter. We know that respondents over-report voting to place themselves in a positive light; the subjective element is even more salient among the many respondents to the surveys aged 15 to 18+, for whom the question is one of intent to vote in the future rather than experience of doing so. As Hooghe et al (2006:19) report from a recent study of 14-15 year olds in 27 countries "when questioned about the likelihood of future voting behaviour ... the expressed willingness to vote ... does not seem to be inspired politically, but rather reflects a more general attitude, in which adolescents simply echo the kind of values that are being portrayed as socially desirable by either the parents or the school environment." In contrast, an incentive to give the desired correct answer to a political knowledge question has no effect, since it doesn't help the respondent who lacks the requisite knowledge. Nevertheless, as the literature reveals, and as we shall see in the survey data here assembled, there is a very close statistical correspondence between political knowledge and the various forms of political participation – including reported turnout.

Since we ask respondents in both countries the same questions, we are able to control for relevant background characteristics such as age, gender, and educational attainment, and focus on the factors associated with informed political participation that distinguish Americans and Canadians, young and older. In addressing strategies for encouraging informed political participation, we ask if emulating the stress in the United States on involvement in nonpartisan voluntary associations is likely to be effective in Canada's different institutional environment, or if we should look more to alternate approaches associated with the high civic literacy countries in Europe. These give greater importance to measures that raise the level of political knowledge, looking to government programs in education, media support, political party financing, information dissemination, etc. This interrogation is given concrete form at the end of the paper in the discussion of alternative approaches to civic education. Today, more than ever, the school is the key arena for promoting the informed political participation of future citizens.

DATA AND METHODS

The data analyzed in this paper is derived from two surveys conducted in 2006, one in the United States and the other in Canada, in which there were roughly 60 common questions. The first was undertaken by CIRCLE (the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, at the University of Maryland). Its Civic and Political Health Survey updated a previous youth survey (Keeter et al 2002). Telephone interviews were conducted in May 2006 with a nationally representative sample of 1,765 people[14] living in the continental United States, of which 1,209 were aged 15 to 25.[15] The Canadian survey

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[13] A recent experiment casts doubt on whether compulsory voting has a positive effect or attentiveness to politics (Milner, Loewen and Hicks, 2007).

[14] The number surveyed was actually higher but I do not include the data from the Internet survey of over-samples of African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans aged 15 to 25. No such effort was undertaken in Canada, both because there is no

was conducted using similar methodology[16] in September 2006 with 877 respondents 15 to 25 and 477 aged 26 and over. Just over one-third (451) of the interviews were conducted in French.[17] (The breakdown of the entire sample by country, age group and gender can be found in Table 1 below.)

The earlier US survey posed 3 political knowledge questions. For this, second, round, five questions were added. (These were selected from from among those I had proposed, designed to be suitable also for Canada and to correspond as closely as possible with the 6 that had been slated for the second round of the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2004.[18] The resulting questionnaires allowed for 8 possible correct political knowledge answers for American respondents, and 10 for Canadians, 7 of which are common to both. It is this combined score out of 7 that serves as our main indicator of political knowledge. (The list of questions can be found in the appendix.)

RESULTS

We begin by comparing young people in Canada and the US with each other and with those over 25 years in age in each country. While the Canadian data is here presented for the first time, CIRCLE has published an initial analysis of the US data. The analysis points to the low level of political knowledge, but attributes the low reported turnout of the respondents primarily to cynicism, "a plurality says that the government is

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comparable population, and also because there is reason to suspect that Internet survey respondents act differently. This is because they are drawn from a list of persons who have expressed initial interest in participating in surveys. Moreover, the methodology used to create Internet samples in Canada is even more problematic than that used by Knowledge Networks which carries out Internet surveys in the US. In Canada, respondents to Internet surveys are drawn from a list of email addresses of people who in another context had indicated an interest in participating in them. Given the method, we should not be surprised when, for example, the results of a survey conducted in January 2006 by D-Code, "an organization that aims to engage youth in the political process," are used by D-Code founder, Robert Barnard, to debunk "the myth that [the 15-34 year olds] are disengaged, by stressing the large number of his respondents who reported sending emails about a cause or signing an online petition" (http://www.d-code.com/pdfs/YouthVoterDNA.pdf.)

[15] The margin of error for the total youth sample (n=1,658) is ±2.5 percentage points. Data collection was done via telephone by Braun Research, Inc. The telephone interviewing over-sampled 15-to-25-year-olds by setting a maximum quota for respondents 26 and older. After that quota was filled, all remaining interviews were conducted with 15-to-25-year-olds. Interviews were conducted with 15 year olds only after getting parental consent.

[16] The US survey, which had greater financial resources available made a greater effort to track down difficult to reach potential respondents. In the end, the response rate was 24.7; while that in Canada it was only 9.7 percent. It is clearly becoming extremely difficult to carry on telephone surveys, especially of young people. For Canada especially, we can see that in the fact that reported voting was much higher than that found by elections Canada - another reason I give little weight to reported voting. In many instances - a glaring example is a survey headlined in Montreal`s La Presse (4 July, 2007) stating that 86% of young Quebeckers were happy – low response rates make conclusions dubious, since those not responding are likely to differ from those responding on the attitudes being surveyed. As far as political knowledge is concerned, the low response rate, if it skewed the outcome, most likely did so in the direction of higher levels of political knowledge. Hence there is no reason to see it affecting the basic findings - except that the differential in response rate could account in part for the lower level of knowledge of the Americans.

[17] The Canadian survey was conducted by Pollara inc. out of its Bathurst, New Brunswick facility. The margin of error for the youth sample(+-)3.3%

[18] Unfortunately, the questions were eliminated at the last moment when it was found that there were too many questions in all, despite having been used in the ESS pre-test in England and Poland.

'almost always wasteful and inefficient' ... a big drop in confidence since 2002" (Lopez et al, 2006: 3-4). Yet more young Americans voted in 2006 than in 2002 and, indeed, than in all elections since 1992.[19] I contend that the key explanation lies elsewhere in the data: that most do not vote is linked to that the fact that they do not have the information needed to cast an informed choice, despite more than two-thirds of respondents claiming to follow what is going on in government and public affairs at least some of the time.

The figures in Table 1 tell the story. Political knowledge is poor, especially among young people. Out of a possible score of 7, the means for correct answers are 2.12 for young Americans and 2.89 for those 26 and over. Canadian young people's scores are a little better: 2.57 mean correct answers, compared with 2.93 for those 26 and over. The smaller age gap in Canada than the US, as we shall see later, is largely due to generational developments among Quebecers.

When we break the results down by question, the most glaring contrast is on international matters: 55 percent of young Americans are unable to name one permanent member country of the UN Security Council (i.e., including the US), compared with only 30 percent of young Canadians. But there is no lack of political ignorance on domestic matters. Fifty-six percent of young Americans are unable to identify citizens as the category of people having the right to vote (compared with 43 percent in Canada.) Equally unnerving is a similar inability of young Americans to name even one cabinet secretary (55 percent) and to identify the party that is more conservative (60 percent). (Canadian numbers are similarly low on these questions, but circumstances made them harder to answer. The Canadian government had been in power for only eight months when the survey was conducted. Hence there were no equivalents of Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice in public view. Moreover, since the new governing party is Conservative, the formulation used ended up being more difficult for Canadians, i.e., "which party is more to the right?" This latter figure is especially revealing, since no expression is used more frequently and consistently to characterize the Republican Party than the word conservative. The 60 percent of 15-25- year-old Americans, and 50 percent of those over 25 who are unable to make this association are effectively off the political map. The correspondence with turnout percentages is surely not a pure coincidence.[20]

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19. http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Exit_Polls.pdf. As noted, the rise is least partially linked to the war - an issue especially salient to young people, even to those with little political information

20 To place this number in comparative perspective, Swedish political scientists describe as an indicator of the low political knowledge of Swedes, the fact that a similar number (48 percent) were able to state the number of parties in the governing coalition in an open-ended question, and that by far the most common wrong answer was seven, i.e., they mistook presence in Parliament for membership in the government (Oscarsson 2004).

TABLE 1
Political knowledge average (sum of 7 questions)

COUNTRY	AGE GROUP	GENDER	Mean	*N*
US	15 - 25	Male	2.35	598
		Female	1.87	532
		Mean	2.12	
	26 +	Male	3.34	292
		Female	2.50	343
		Mean	2.89	
Canada	15 - 25	Male	2.91	424
		Female	2.26	453
		Mean	2.57	
	26 +	Male	3.45	211
		Female	2.46	236
		Mean	2.93	

As the literature leads us to expect (e.g. Gronlund 2003), Table 1 confirms that older males are the most politically knowledgeable. While males are politically more knowledgeable the females in both age groups and both countries (see Thomas and Young 2006), the difference is lower among those under 25. This is not, we should add, because young women are more knowledgeable than their elders, but because young men are significantly less knowledgeable than theirs.

In Tables 3, 4 and 5, which set out these relationships, a consistent approach is taken. The dependent (predicted) variable is political knowledge, i.e., the mean of correct answers, and the analysis explores the link to specific expressions of these different types of predictors ("independent" variables). Since the dependent variable is interval (0-7, or 0-10) rather than dichotomous (either-or), the most appropriate statistical measure of that relationship is multiple linear regression. Apart from the traditional statistical measure of that relationship, the beta coefficient, the tables provide the *T* score, now a commonly used expression of that relationship. The higher the *T* score, the greater the confidence of statistical significance. (A significance level of below 01 means that we can be 99 percent confident that the relationship between the independent and dependent variable is not the product of chance.)

Political Participation and the Sources of Political Knowledge

Before looking at the predictors of political knowledge, it is useful to see if our results confirm findings in the literature that political knowledge correlates not only with voting but also with other forms of political engagement.[21] Here political knowledge is the independent variable, while the various forms of political participation surveyed, both conventional (vote, discuss politics, display poster, contact media to express an opinion), and unconventional (protest, petition, boycott, etc.), are dependent variables in a multiple linear

[21] See, e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Junn 1991; Gronlund 2003.

regression. As shown in Table 2,[22] with the exception of calling a radio or TV station to express an opinion, more politically knowledgeable people are significantly more likely to engage in the various forms of conventional and unconventional political participation,[23] though the relationship is stronger for the more conventional forms, especially voting regularly. We can see, moreover, as reoccurs consistently throughout the study, that whether the respondent is male or female, American or Canadian, younger or older, or better or worse educated usually also has an important effect, but one that does not wash out the overall relationship.[24]

Having established that among the respondents to the two surveys those more informed about politics are those who can be expected to participate more frequently in the various forms of political life,[25] we can now turn to the various factors that contribute to their being more informed. In the following tables in which the dependent (predicted) variable is the mean of correct answers, the analysis explores the link to predictors of informed political participation identified in the literature. The stronger the relationship, the higher the *T* score (in absolute terms, (i.e., it can be expressed positively or negatively). While this allows us to compare the effect of different predictors, we are especially interested in those relationships found to be significant (i.e., for which the significance is below .01, so we can be 99 percent confident that the relationship between the independent and dependent variable is not a product of chance).

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[22] The figure in the table excludes those too young to vote. To get at them we examine a related question which gets at the voting intentions (likelihood of voting: always to never) of those too young to vote in the last election. Though the relationship is not statistically significant per se, given the low number in this category, the significance level of .164 is worth noting, especially when compared with the absence of a relationship between intention to vote and to go further in school (Sig = .729).

[23] This confirms a finding by Stolle who used data from the European Social survey to test "whether these new forms of engagement truly substitute for the declining engagement in traditional political and social activities, [concluding that] "there is a gap between those youth who are broadly engaged in a myriad of both new and traditional channels and those youth who are not engaged at all" (Stolle and Cruz 2005: 96-7).

[24] Gender, country, age group, education completed (as well as language) are set up as "dummy" variables (either/or - printed in upper case). This is automatic in the case of gender and, here, in the case of country (US/Canada) and language (French/English). But it is also applied to education completed (completed high school or less =1, more =2) and age group (15-25 =1, 26 plus =2).

[25] A useful insight into the sources of political knowledge outside the activities associated with the various forms of political participation is provided by a recent Australian study. Edwards et al (2005) on two occasions a year apart interviewed 476 students between 15 and 18 years of age from 55 representative schools. The authors listed twelve possible sources in the young person's environment and asked "where do you get your information about voting in elections?" with the respondents selecting among "none", "little", "some" and "most" for each source. The family received the highest score, followed closely by TV, newspapers, teachers and radio. However, when the authors looked at the correlation between the amount of information from each source and student intention to vote when 18 "even if voting were not compulsory," newspaper readership proved most influential followed closely by information from parents, with the rest well back.

TABLE 2
The relationship between political knowledge (mean of 7 questions) and various forms of political participation

	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		13.536	.000
EDUCATION COMPLETED	.240	11.679	.000
GENDER	.196	10.314	.000
COUNTRY	.069	3.304	.001
AGE GROUP	.033	1.635	.102
Voted in the last federal election	.069	3.304	.001
Vote in elections: always to never	.165	5.788	.000
Talk to people about who to vote for[26]	.109	5.293	.000
Contacted a newspaper or magazine to express opinion	.064	3.108	.002
Called a radio or TV talk show to express political opinion.	.011	.573	.567
Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration	.042	2.093	.037
Signed an e-mail petition about a social or political issue	.044	2.105	.035
Signed a written petition about a social or political issue	.117	5.285	.000
Not bought something on a matter of principle	.059	2.838	.005

Media Use

The first set of variables that predict informed political participation to be explored here are related to media use. It is well established that newspaper reading and television news watching are positively related to political knowledge and political participation.[27] The regression data for both countries and age groups combined set out in Table 3 show that newspaper reading and, even more, reading news on the Internet, clearly affect political knowledge. The effect of television is more ambiguous. The overall effect of TV watching is negative, while the effect of watching TV news is positive, but relatively weak). Radio listening has no effect. To further explore the relationship, the regression with those media-consumption variables found to be significant in Table 3 are split by country and age group in Table 3A. Reading news on the Internet turns out to have the strongest correlation with political knowledge in both countries – and not only

[26] The remaining questions in this table gave respondents the following alternatives: "Yes in the last 12 months," "Yes, but not in the last 12 months," and "No."

[27] See, e.g., Brynin and Newton (2003); Norris (1996); Putnam (1995).

for the young.[28] This is apparently a new development. Newspaper reading remains significant, though somewhat more weakly among Americans; while it is among Americans and younger respondents that watching TV for fewer hours has a significant positive effect on political knowledge.

TABLE 3
The relationship between various forms of media use and political knowledge (mean of seven questions)

	Standardized Coefficients Beta	*T*	Sig.
(Constant)		2.817	.005
AGE GROUP	.089	5.092	.000
GENDER	.178	10.937	.000
COUNTRY	.117	7.115	.000
EDUCATION COMPLETED	.277	16.098	.000
On how many of the past 7 days did you			
- read a newspaper	.103	5.984	.000
- watch the national news	.020	1.193	.233
- listen to the radio news	.001	.042	.966
- read news on Internet.	.186	11.062	.000
How many hours per day do you spend watching TV	-.033	-2.002	.045

[28] A 2005 Canadian survey found that 65 percent of Internet users reported accessing news sites at least once a week, the most frequently mentioned sites being MSN, Yahoo, and Radio-Canada/CBC (The Canadian Internet Project: http://www.cipic.ca/en/intro.htm).

TABLE 3A
The relationship between various forms of media use and political knowledge (mean of seven questions) by age group and country

	Age (US and Canada combined)	Standardized Coefficients	*T*	Sig	*Country (all ages)*		*T*	Sig.
		Beta				Beta		
(Constant)	15-25		22.780	.000	US		16.126	.000
Past 7 days: on how many do you - read a newspaper		.087	3.881	.000		.063	2.115	.035
- watch the national news on TV.		.043	1.969	.049		.039	1.325	.185
- read news on the Internet.		.246	11.168	.000		.280	9.501	.000
How many hours do you watch TV daily		-.057	-2.650	.008		-.062	-2.163	.031
(Constant)	26 +		14.764	.000	Canada		16.411	.000
- read a newspaper.		.194	6.538	.000		.096	2.793	.005
- watch the National news on TV		.040	1.330	.184		.028	.837	.403
- read news on the Internet.		.277	9.499	.000		.222	6.603	.000
Daily hours watching TV.		-.033	-1.122	.262		-.029	-.879	.380

Voluntary Group Participation

Like other such studies in the United States, the CIRCLE survey (see Lopez et al, 2006) poses a large number of questions about involvement in voluntary associations of various kinds. As noted, our interest is not in such activities per se, but in their relationship to informed political participation, especially voting, as well as to political knowledge. Hence only a small number of these questions are included in the Canadian survey. The most general asked: "have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity, or haven't you had time." As Table 4 shows, the relationship between such involvement and political knowledge is significant for those over 25 in both countries, but only for the Americans under 25. In Table 4A, we look at a related question directed toward those still at school. The Canada-US difference again emerges when the indicator is the number of groups in which the students participate, though in neither case is there a significant effect on political knowledge. It does emerge in response to the question of whether any of these groups involve student government or social or political issues.[29] Here we see a clear significant link between a positive response and political knowledge in the US, but none whatsoever in Canada.

[29]See von Erlach (2006), for why this is a key question.

TABLE 4
The relationship between participating in a community service or volunteer activity[30] and political knowledge (mean of seven questions)

Age Group	Country	Standardized Coefficients	*T*	Sig.
		Beta		
15-25	US	.205	7.018	.000
	Canada	.074	2.166	.031
26 +	US	.248	6.420	.000
	Canada	.161	3.397	.001

TABLE 4A
The relationship between participating in a group at school and political knowledge (mean of 7 questions); 15-25 year olds

COUNTRY		Standardized Coefficients	*t*	Sig.
		Beta		
US	(Constant)		8.353	.000
	About how many organized groups or clubs are you currently participating in?	.086	1.326	.186
	Do any of these groups include student government or organizations concerned with social or political issues?	.230	3.547	.000
Canada	(Constant)		4.521	.000
	About how many organized groups ...	.076	.859	.392
	Do any of these groups include	.074	.834	.406

One important difference between the two countries is thus emerging: participation in voluntary groups seems to be more important in producing politically informed young citizens in the US than in Canada.

Political Knowledge and Education

Having entered the school, we should next bring education itself into the analysis of factors associated with political knowledge. Regrettably, the CIRCLE survey asked far more questions about what goes on outside the classroom than inside it, and the comparative data is too limited and contradictory too take is very far. One question asked whether his or her classes required the respondent to keep up with politics or government, either by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or going onto the Internet. As Table 5 shows,

[30] "Have you ever spent time participating in any community service or volunteer activity, or haven't you had time to do this? "
1 YES, Have done it in the last 12 months
2 YES, But have not done it in last 12 months
3 No, Have not done it in the last few of years

the effect of such a reported requirement on the political knowledge of the students is weak, only approaching significance in the US. Nevertheless, the reported frequency that history, government, or social studies teachers encourage students to discuss political and social issues over which people have different opinions positively and significantly correlates with political knowledge in both countries.[31]

TABLE 5
The relationship between civic education in class and political knowledge (mean of 7 questions); 15-25 year olds

Country		Standardized Coefficients	*T*	Sig.
		Beta		
US	(Constant)		5.510	.000
	Do any of your classes require you to keep up with politics or government, either by reading the newspaper, watching TV...?	.086	2.150	.032
	In classes that deal with history, government, social studies, or related subjects, how often do teachers encourage class to discuss political and social issues in which people have different opinions?	.146	3.640	.000
Canada	(Constant)		8.421	.000
	Do any of your classes require you to keep ...	.061	1.462	.144
	In classes that deal with history, government, social studies....	.180	3.855	.000

Attitudes toward Politics

A number of other questions explored pertinent attitudes toward certain aspects of politics. As might be expected, Table 6 shows that a smaller proportion of Americans than Canadians, and older versus younger respondents, believe that government should do more to solve problems rather than that government does too many things better left to businesses and individuals. When it comes to the question asking whether politics is a way for the powerful to keep power to themselves or, instead, a way for the less powerful to compete on equal footing, slightly more respondents in both countries chose the cynical view. Table 6A shows that as a general rule, in both countries and both age groups, those that who want less government and see politics as serving the powerful, tend to display a higher average level of political knowledge.[32] This is reinforced by the fact that the less one agrees that "it matters which party wins" the higher the average political knowledge. But, digging more deeply, on the question of party identification, which is not included

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[31] Part of the explanation may lie in the gradations allowed by the wording of possible answers. The former question is a simple yes or no, while the latter goes from never (1) to often (4). This explanation is suggested by the small differences in the beta coefficients.

[32] When the data are broken down by country and by age, no such relationship is found for young Canadians.

in the table since the formulation is quite different in the two countries,[33] we can see an important divergence. In Canada, all categories, young and older, male and female, French and English-speaking who identify with a political party are more knowledgeable.[34] This is not quite the case in the US, with "independents" (.246) averaging the same levels of political knowledge as Republicans (.245), but almost half a point lower than Democrats.

TABLE 6
Canadian and American attitudes toward the role of government, by age group

AGE GROUP	COUNTRY		Percent agree
15-25	US	Government should do more to solve problems	63,0
		Government does too many things better left to businesses and individuals	33,1
	Canada	Government should do more to solve...	77,3
		Government does too many things...	20,5
26 +	US	Government should do more to solve ...	54,1
		Government does too many things ...	41,9
	Canada	Government should do more to solve ...	61,2
		Government does too many things...	32,9

TABLE 6A
The relationship between attitudes toward politics and government and political knowledge (mean of 7 questions)

	Standardized Coefficients	*T*	Sig.
	Beta		
(Constant)		7.706	.000
COUNTRY	.172	5.571	.000
GENDER	.197	6.426	.000
AGE GROUP	.169	5.423	.000
Government should do more to solve problems	.070	2.261	.024
Politics is way for powerful to keep power	.062	2.017	.044
Difference which party controls government	-.123	-4.022	.000

[33] The US survey asked whether respondents were Democrats, Republicans or independents, a categorization hard to apply to Canada.

[34] This is one reason why, here and elsewhere, I argue in favour of adopting proportional systems of elections. There is a good logical and empirical basis (see Milner 2004a) for asserting that PR fosters party identification.

Another question gets at a dimension suggested by Franklin (2005), namely, that the longer a person lives in the same neighbourhood the better the chance that they enter networks bringing them into contact with politically motivated individuals, and, in the case of young people, the greater the likelihood they are still living in the parental home and thus benefiting from an appropriate support group.[35] The data, however, do not bolster his contention. No significant relationship was found between young people's length of residence in the community and political knowledge (as well as intention to vote).

To sum up what we have seen thus far: the overall disparity between young Canadians and Americans is not great; nevertheless, compared to young Americans, young Canadians' somewhat higher levels of informed political participation seem to be more closely related to traditional factors like newspaper reading and party identification than to voluntary group involvement in the community and at school.

Political Knowledge in Quebec and the Rest of Canada

The Canadian study, as is often the case, oversampled Quebecers in order to allow for statistically meaningful comparisons between them and Canadians in the English-speaking provinces (ROC). (Note that there is a correspondence between language and region since all Quebec surveys were conducted in French and all those in ROC were conducted in English.[36]) This dimension will become especially salient when we further explore the distinction suggested above, i.e., between factors such as media access and party identification versus those related to voluntary group involvement.

Table 7 presents mean correct answers among the Canadian respondents divided by age group, gender and language. (Note that since the language dimension is limited to Canada, we are able to base the score out of 10 possible rights answers. For comparative purposes, there is a separate column for data based on the 7 questions, which shows that the additional questions do not alter the overall relationships.) While for those over 25, political knowledge is higher among English speakers, both men and women, this is reversed when we get to those 15 to 25. Not only are young Quebecers, male and female, more politically informed (4.10 average questions correct out of 10) than their ROC peers (3.55) , but, unlike both them and their American peers, the young Quebecers are more politically informed than their elders (at 3.88).[37] (We should note here that the knowledge questions are oriented toward national, i.e., Canadian, politics and institutions; we should also note that given the limited number of respondents in this category [*N* = 289 for

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[35] Using US voting turnout data since 1972, Franklin finds that young adults who had lived all their lives in the same neighbourhood were 21 percent more likely to vote than those who had recently moved there, suggesting that: "the anonymous individual indeed has less reason to vote, unless he or she has already acquired the habit of voting... [but] a person whose name is known, within a supportive network of family and friends (or acquaintances) expressively engaged with one-another on the subject of their vote intentions, needs a very good excuse for not voting" (Franklin 2005: 23-28). In a similar vein, a Statistics Canada study suggests a similar phenomenon in Canada. "A strong sense of belonging to the community as a young adult resulted in higher odds of voting" (Milan 2005:4).

[36] It is now common practice among polling firms to do this as a lesser of evils, given limited means. A minimally meaningful study including Quebec anglophones and rest-of-Canada francophones would need to significantly oversample these groups. One effect would be that the already too small representation of Quebec francophones would be diluted even further.

[37] This accounts for the smaller overall age-group difference in political knowledge in Canada than the US.

those aged 15-25; and 146 for those 26 and over], the margin of error is too large to allow for definitive conclusions.)

TABLE 7
Political knowledge (sum of 10 questions)

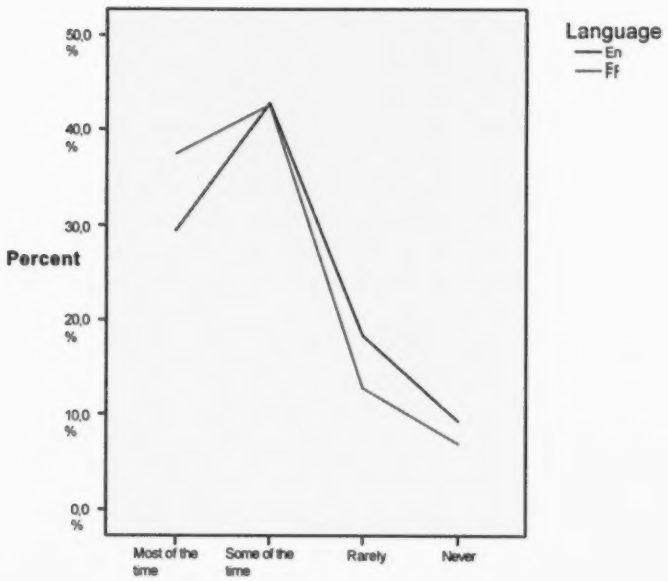
Age Group	Gender	Language/Region	Mean	*N*	Mean of sum of 7 questions	Standard Deviation
15-25	Male	ROC	3.91	285		2.257
		Quebec	4.75	139		2.344
		Total	4.18	424		2.317
	Female	ROC	3.22	303		2.153
		Quebec	3.50	150		2.042
		Total	3.31	453		2.119
	Total	ROC	3.55	588	2.43	2.229
		Quebec	4.10	289	2.85	2.276
		Total	3.73	877	2.57	2.258
26 +	Male	ROC	5.03	142		2.788
		Quebec	4.65	69		2.700
		Total	4.91	211		2.759
	Female	ROC	3.50	159		2.068
		Quebec	3.19	77		2.090
		Total	3.40	236		2.076
	Total	ROC	4.22	301	3.00	2.548
		Quebec	3.88	146	2.78	2.498
		Total	4.11	447	2.93	2.534

Part of the explanation for this generational inversion lies in the modernization of Quebec's educational system. In the International Adult Literacy Study (IALS) which tested a sample of the population of 20 countries in their ability to comprehend written texts in the early 1990s French speakers' average score was well below that of English speaking Canadians (264.1 vs. 278.8). The gap dropped to 5 points when the test was repeated 10 years later, with the bulk of the change due to the youngest group. Indeed, francophones aged 15 to 25 had not just reduced the gap but actually surpassed their English-speaking counterparts 292.7 to 290 (Bernèche and Perron 2005).

One possible additional explanatory factor is the effect of politicization due to the polarization in Quebec over the national question and language issues during this period. Yet this does not easily fit the fact that Quebecers over 25 are less politically knowledgeable than their English Canadian peers. Moreover, we do not see evidence of the significant attitudinal differences that one would expect from a more politicized population. In relation to political cynicism, we find only a slightly greater likelihood for Quebecers than English Canadian young people to see politics as a means for the less powerful to compete (56 vs. 52 percent) rather than a means of the powerful keeping power for themselves. Conversely, however, this difference becomes highly salient when applied to the question whether they always do or intend to vote. Of the 123 uncynical young Quebecers, a full 96 said they (would) always vote, while of the 224 corresponding young anglophone Canadians, only 67 responded in the same way.

This distinction is noteworthy. While on most other attitudinal and most behavioural indicators there is nothing that significantly distinguishes young Quebecers from their ROC compatriots, a recurring difference is the young Quebecers' attentiveness to the political world around them. As we can see in Figure 1 below, when asked about the extent to which they follow what's going on in politics, 10 percent more Quebecers respond "most of the time." This is confirmed in Table 8, which shows that young French Canadians report following the news in the media – especially via television, though *not* on the Internet – on significantly more days than their ROC peers. Conversely, when it comes to participating in a community service or volunteer activity, Table 9 sheds additional light on Table 4's revelation of a weaker relationship of such activity with political knowledge for Canadians.[38] Among Canadians, this relationship is significantly weaker for francophones.

FIGURE 1
Degree of attention paid to politics



[38] Tossutti (2004) examines existing data concluding that there is little evidence that voluntarism leads to political engagement for young Canadians.

TABLE 8
Media use and language

		Read a newspaper past 7 days	Watch the national news on television	Listen to the radio news	Read news on the Internet
ROC	Mean (in days)	3.06	3.22	2.96	2.39
	N	587	587	586	581
Quebec	Mean	3.17	4.82	2.86	1.49
	N	288	288	287	286

TABLE 9
The relationship between participating in a community service or volunteer activity and political knowledge (mean of 10 questions)

Age group	Language	Standardized Coefficients	*T*	Sig.
		Beta		
15-25	ROC	.091	2.212	.027
	Quebec	.071	1.159	.248
26 +	ROC	.228	4.037	.000
	Quebec	.024	.273	.785

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS AND MODELS

The above findings indicate that the distinction drawn earlier between young Canadians and Americans is especially salient when applied to young Quebecers. We noted above that a comparatively very high proportion of those young Quebecers who see politics as a means for the less powerful to compete (rather than a means of the powerful keeping power for themselves) report that they always vote or intend to vote. We noted further that, compared to their anglophone peers, the young francophones follow news on television on significantly more days, and responded 10 percent more frequently "most of the time" when asked the extent to which they follow what's going on in politics. In contrast, the effect of participating in a community service or volunteer activity on political knowledge was found to be significantly weaker for francophone Quebecers than for their English Canadian and, even more, their American peers.

These data can be seen as manifestations of alternative paths to informed political participation, bringing us back to the distinction drawn earlier. In response to the question of whether any of their classes require them to keep up with politics or government through the media, there is a clear contrast between the responses of the French and English speaking Canadian students. Among the former, 66 percent answered yes, compared to 46 percent of the former. This bolsters our contention that young Quebecers live and study in an environment that is more conducive to attentiveness to traditional political processes – elections, political parties and (activities intended to directly affect) government policies than that in English-

speaking North America, which places greater stress on civic engagement via voluntary, nonpartisan activities and organizations unrelated to government policies.,

Canadians, especially those outside Quebec, both researchers and policy makers, thus confront a choice, specifically when it comes to civic education (see below). Observers (e.g., Westheimer et al. 2007) suggest that Canadian provinces tend to be taking the latter, American path. What we have seen suggests that, if this is the case, it may not be the wisest approach to take. For one thing, Canadians have options not available to Americans since Canada is not constrained by the institutional and constitutional obstacles faced by our neighbours to the south.[39] In the United States, electoral administration is a prerogative of the states, hence, there can be no equivalent of Elections Canada: the many specific actions undertaken by nonpartisan public electoral authorities in other countries to address declining youth participation, must, in the US, typically be left to voluntary associations. Even registering young people so that they are eligible to vote in federal elections depends on local initiatives, since only state authorities can change the rules regarding voter registration.

It was noted at the outset that recent efforts by Elections Canada directed toward young people [40] appear to have borne some fruit in the increased turnout of first time voters in 2004. There is more to be done here, and Canadians generally can profit from looking to the experience and efforts of comparable public bodies in high-civic-literacy countries for guidance. A useful comparison can be drawn with Finland, where several of the political knowledge questions posed in the Canadian survey were incorporated into a national survey.[41] Table 10 compares the answers for the two countries (for the wording of the questions see the appendix). Given institutional differences (in particular the interval between elections, which is fixed in Finland),[42] and the fact that it has been necessary to give added weight to the responses of the 35 percent of respondents over 25 in order to make the Canadian overall sample comparable to the Finnish one (which reflects the entire population rather than overrepresenting young people), we need be cautious in our interpretation of the specific numbers in Table 10. Nevertheless the overall higher level of political knowledge in Finland is beyond doubt.

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[39] For example, (the US Supreme Court's interpretation of) the First Amendment of the US Constitution makes it impossible to regulate the use of the electronic media for political information purposes.

[40] There were numerous efforts to get first time voters onto the National Register of Electors. Elections Canada sponsored or worked with other organizations to raise awareness among young people. In 2004 and 2006, Elections Canada launched Youth Vote, a joint initiative with Student Vote to provide students below voting age with the opportunity to experience the federal electoral process through a parallel election in their schools, with the results were broadcast on television, posted on the Web and published in newspapers across the country. It supported Rush the Vote, an organization that aims to increase youth voter turnout and political awareness through musical events at which performers encourage voting and democratic involvement. A contest was held for students to create public service announcements telling their peers why democracy is important and why it is important to vote. There were also poster contests. For the 2004 election, in partnership with four student associations, a poster was displayed on campuses across Canada. Elections Canada also provided support for a youth voter education kit as part of Youth Vote 2004 and 2006, an education and media initiative launched by the Dominion Institute, and has been working in partnership with the Historica Foundation to develop a new *YouthLinks* education module on citizenship and voting, entitled "Voices."

[41] The questions that had been slated for the second round of the European Social Survey, but dropped at the last minute for lack of space, were included in the Finnish survey.

[42] On the other hand, there are three large parties in Finland, making it harder there than it is in Canada to identify the second largest party.

TABLE 10
Political knowledge questions
(percent of correct answers)

	Finland	*Canada*
Minister of Finance (Finland)		
One cabinet minister (Canada)	67	33
Second largest party	52	57
Income tax progressivity	52	40
UN Security Council (average correct)	52	43
Entitled to vote	73	56
Election cycle	91	23
Average	64	40

Combined with the fact that Finland consistently places at the top of international educational performance league tables,[43] such figures suggest that Canada could benefit from looking at the Finnish approach to civic education. Finnish 14- and 15-year- olds in the last year of compulsory school are required to complete a full-year civic education course to graduate.[44] The vast majority then goes on to complete upper secondary school (which usually takes 3 years), where they are given two compulsory and two optional civic education courses taught by instructors with both a teaching diploma and a master's degree in history or civics.

Application of the Finnish model per se would not necessarily be appropriate for Canada, but certain aspects merit serious consideration. First of all, taking civic education is something every Finnish student takes for granted in the years leading up to the age of voting. Second, while the link to political life is stressed, it is related less to involvement in voluntary community organizations than to the political process as such. A recent drop in voter turnout among younger Finns has led to a refocusing on civic education at all levels, including teacher training. One dimension of this effort is to augment collaboration between teachers and local officials and politicians so that each can learn from the other through organized visits and hands-on experiences, with the priority on schools in areas with low turnout.[45]

Application of such approaches in Canada would entail, I contend, even greater efforts to target young people lacking the information on which to base an informed vote as engaged citizens. This entails

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[43] For example, Finland placed first in PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment of the OECD, which involved dozens of countries testing their 15-year-olds' skills and knowledge. For a discussion and explanation, see http://www.edu.fi/english/page.asp?path=500,571,36263

[44] The laws setting out, respectively, the goals of the compulsory and upper-secondary school courses begin: "The role of the civic education is to guide the pupils' growth to active and responsible actors in the society...Civic education gives them the basic knowledge about the structure and functions of the society, and about the citizen's possibilities to have influence." "Civic education...deepens the students' conceptions of the society around them. The structure of the society, and key concepts, such as power, economy, and participating, are discussed in the level of the Finnish society, Europe, and the whole world." Quoted in the IDEA International database on civic education (WWW.civiced.indea.int).

[45] Eva Wisse, for the UK Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations Department of Constitutional Matters and Legislation, *Promoting democracy An international exploration of policy and implementation practice.* http://www.google.com/search?q=cache:d5Ykto2COOUJ:www.oecd.org/dataoecd/59/50/36502447.pdf+%22promoting+democracy%22ministry+of+the+interior&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=ca.

designing and disseminating civic education programs to bring political knowledge to individuals low in the requisite home and community resources,[46] supplemented by targeted government programs affecting the supply of political knowledge related to political party financing, information dissemination, voter registration, mock parliaments, etc. Such young people are frequently potential dropouts, and civic education courses need to be offered at a time when they are still in school but close to voting age, and in a form most likely to appeal to them. To identify what this might entail, we need to learn from such practices elsewhere. We currently lack even minimal systematic comparative data on basic aspects of civic education such as the hours of teaching time involved and whether it is compulsory and required for graduation.[47] What we do know is primarily based on American studies, which suggest that civic education in the US is markedly skewed toward constitutional history and voluntary community participation (see Milner 2005). Few studies, however, single out civic education's effects on those who need it most, i.e., students low in resources outside the school.[48] It is reasonable to suppose that community involvement is less useful to those who need civic education more, and vice-versa.

If this is so, it suggests that taking the American approach amounts to targeting primarily likely future political participants rather than potential political drop-outs. This is visualized in Figure 2 below, which categorizes North American young citizens based on a combination of political knowledge (pictured in relation to a minimal threshold of civic literacy) and likeliness to vote. The four groups are termed: participants; inconsistent (future) participants; potential political dropouts, and political dropouts. Based on the data analyzed here, we suggest that it is the group in rectangle 3, the potential but not yet actual political drop-outs, that should be the first priority, rather than those in rectangle 2 that the American approach tends to target.

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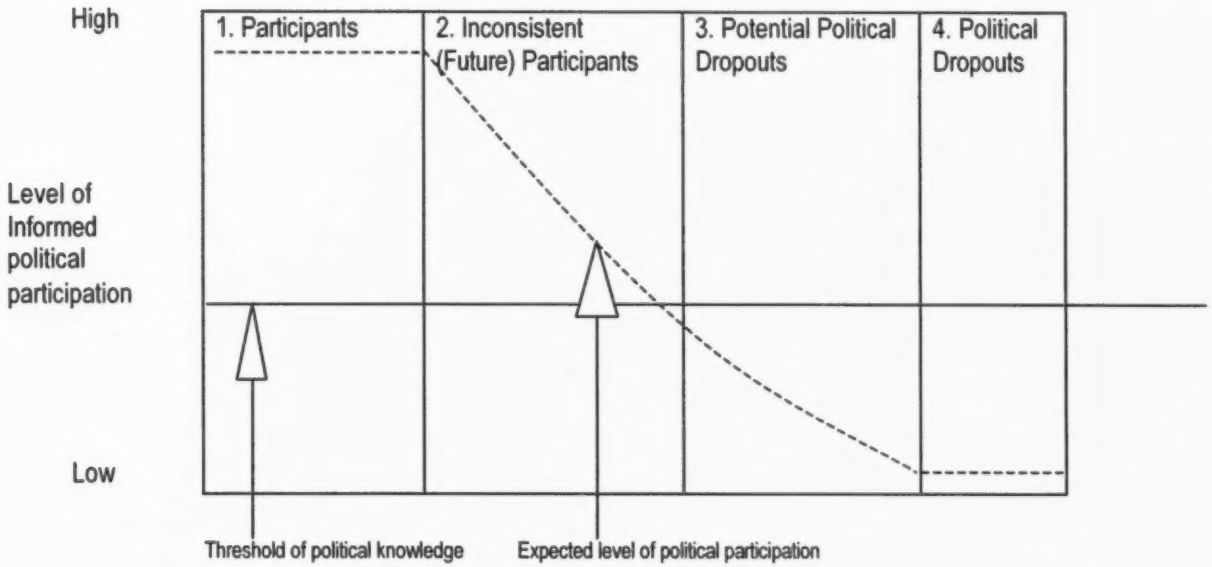
[46] Twice as many of the 77 percent of students who reported daily or once or twice weekly discussion of school studies with parents scored satisfactory or better (32 to 16) than the 23 percent who never or hardly ever has such discussion in the (difficult) NAEP test of proficiency in civics (NCES 1999: 100).

[47] Comparative data on civic education is being assembled by a team coordinated by the author based at IDEA International in Stockholm. The database is compiled out of the responses to questionnaires completed by knowledgeable individuals in 40 democratic countries. See Boylston, Milner and Nguyen 2007.

[48] One related study looking at the effects of mock elections on Hispanic students in Colorado in 2002 and low-SES students across the three sites in 2004 found that these "provide an added boost for minority and low-income students (McDevitt and Kiousis, 2006: 2-3). Whiteley (2005) argues from a reading of the literature the effectiveness of civic education depends most of all on the resources available to the student outside the school. It is for resource poor students that the school is the most important institutional resource.

FIGURE 2
Mapping youth political participation



As a rule, it is only when they are still in school that potential political drop-outs can be reached in meaningful numbers. To address the school dropout dimension, we should also consider, as I argued in a previous paper (Milner 2005), changing the voting age in order to offer civic education courses at a time when those needing them are still in school but close to voting age. With Canada's – unlike Finland's – high level of school dropout rates, lowering the voting age,[49] in combination with compulsory civic education courses at an age when casting a first vote is looming in the young person's horizon, would result in more potential voters still in school and, thus, in a position to benefit not only from civics classes, but also from complementary activities.[50] I am thinking especially of mock elections that are being carried out high school students in the United States, Canada, Sweden and Norway (and many other countries no doubt).[51]

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[49] Franklin (2005) calls for such a measure because the period in a young person's life after leaving the parental home typically at age 18-20 is unsettled, and thus a bad time to develop habits about voting or not voting. However, in the context of an information world comprised of Internet based subcultures consisting of chat rooms, blogs and the like, the picture of adolescents getting information from family discussions of the news over supper or chewing over the developments reported on in the morning paper at breakfast has somewhat paled. According to a recent American study, these potential political dropouts can be affected simply by remaining longer in school. Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos (2003) show the effect of extra years schooling induced through compulsory schooling laws increased the likelihood of becoming politically involved, finding a strong effect on voter turnout.

[50] Given that public opinion is unenthusiastic about the idea, the initial step could be a series of pilot projects, perhaps beginning with certain provincial or local elections. Dates of municipal elections are fixed in advance and local political actors and issues can most easily be brought into the civics classroom.

[51] The first, founded in 1988, was Kids Voting USA which now arranges for teachers in 39 states to help students gather information about candidates and issues, so that, on Election Day, they cast their ballots in special booths.

McDevitt and Kiousis (2006:3) recently assessed the effects over three years of Kids Voting USA,[52] finding that "while the curriculum did not affect voting in the third year, 2004, directly, it did animate the family as a setting for political discussion and media use, habits that eventually lead to voting." There is reason to believe that similar effects have been produced by parallel Canadian efforts[53] supported by Elections Canada.[54]

This is not the time or place to go into the content of civic education classes – except to stress what the survey data revealed. Media use is still strongly linked to informed political participation. When it comes to young people, the role of the school in fostering habits of newspaper reading remains fundamental. But clearly newspapers cannot do the job alone. Radio seems not to be an important source of information for young people, while the days of TV serving this function may be numbered. We found that using the Internet as a source of news is now more strongly correlated with political knowledge than reading newspapers. Emphasis must thus be clearly placed on bringing in appropriate electronic political information, with a view toward developing habits of attentiveness to – and the ability to pick up signals about – the political world. We are learning more about the kinds of electronic information sources that are most promising, how news Web sites without being overloaded with high tech gadgetry can be made more attractive and informative to young people (Sherr 2005; see also Gronlund 2007). As we have seen in this survey, in the US and, only slightly less so in Canada, a substantial proportion of young people arrive at voting age lacking the minimal knowledge needed to cast any kind of vote. Can the Internet be used to impart that knowledge, as well as induce the habits of attentiveness and skills required for acquiring it? Given the certainty that the Internet will be even more central to the socialization process of upcoming generation, this is a question that will have to be comprehensively addressed.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Clearly, further exploration of the relationship between what goes on in the classroom and informed participation is needed. For example, we would benefit from a study of the effects of the imposition of a compulsory civic education course in grade 10 in Ontario in 2000 – especially on the potential political drop-outs from information-poor backgrounds. More generally, irrespective of other recommendations for action, a priority must be to include more and more detailed civic education-related questions in future surveys – especially questions that will allow researchers to pinpoint the effects of such courses on students lacking resources outside the school.

If there is a wider conclusion to be drawn, it can be linked to our finding that informed political participation among young people, though unacceptably low, tends to be higher in Canada (and especially for francophones) than in the US. We have noted that the relationship between involvement in voluntary

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[52] Students who were juniors or seniors in 2002 were interviewed in the fall/winter of 2002 and 2003, and again in 2004 when all were of voting age.

[53] In the October 2003 Ontario provincial election, the 2004 and 2006 federal election, and the 2005 BC provincial election – see Studentvote.ca.

[54] The Chief Electoral Officer reported (*Electoral Insight* – July 2003 Elections Canada): "Community relations officers for youth identified neighbourhoods with high concentrations of students for special registration drives, assisted in locating polls in places easily accessible to youth, and informed the community and youth leaders about registration and voting."

associations and political knowledge is weaker for Canadians 15 to 25, reaching the point of insignificance for those in Quebec. We have suggested that the American approach, which emphasizes involvement in such associations, may not be especially effective at inducing political participation. This is certainly the case if we are concerned about informed political participation, since the American approach tends to downplay anything that smacks of partisanship.

For Canadians, it would appear that emulating the stress in the United States on involvement in nonpartisan voluntary group activities[55] is likely to be less effective than the approach taken in the high civic literacy countries in Europe, whereby political knowledge is regarded as indispensable to meaningful political participation. Such an approach stresses measures that raise the level of political knowledge by making the environment of young people rich in political information, targeting especially those lacking the resources to gain access to it on their own. It looks to government programs in education, media support, political party financing, information dissemination etc. It does not discourage political involvement, even in civic education. At the core of this approach is getting political knowledge to those who lack it.

This distinction applies, before anything else, to the framework in which we approach the subject itself. I suggested earlier that certain influential researchers in the US tend to define away the problem by a methodology which, in effect, costlessly invites respondents to place themselves in a positive light by taking a subjective approach in which, taken to the extreme, youth participation becomes an expression of "that which engages me"?[56] This path may be psychically rewarding for both the observer and observed and fit nicely into the dominant youth culture. But, I am persuaded, it fails to directly address the causes of the deficit in what we still take to be democracy. Researchers and policy-makers in Canada would do better to take an approach centered on identifying those who lack the needed the necessary political knowledge and getting it to them.

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[55] A review of provincial civics documents reports signs that Canada is following the US along this path (see Westheimer et al 2007).

[56] This quote comes from one of a number of university students who paid no attention to to the news media studied by David Mindich (2005). The quote reads: 'I'd rather play video games than read a newspaper because... it engages you more.'

APPENDIX: POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

(US and Canada)

- As far as you know, does the federal government spend more on Social Security [old aid pensions] or on foreign aid?
- Would you say that one of the [major] parties is more conservative [more to the right] than the other on the national level? IF yes: Which party is more to the right?
- Which of the following best describes who is entitled to vote in federal elections?
  - 1 Residents
  - 2 Taxpayers
  - 3 Legal residents
  - 4 Citizens
  - 8 Don't know
  - 9 Refused

- Please name two members of the Presidents [Federal] Cabinet and identify the department they represent [are in charge of].
- Five countries have permanent seats on the Security Council of the United Nations. Which of these countries can you name?

(Canada only)

- What is the maximum number of years between Canadian elections?
  - 1 3 years
  - 2 4 years
  - 3 5 years
  - 4 6 years
  - 5 other number of years

- Can you tell me which party has the SECOND largest number of seats in the House of Commons?
  - 1 The Conservatives
  - 2 The Liberals
  - 3 The Bloc Quebecois
  - 4 The NDP

- Obviously, a person on a low income will pay less total money in income tax than someone on a high income. But do you think that a person on a low income pays
  - 1 a bigger *proportion* of their earnings in income tax than someone on a high income
  - 2 the same *proportion*
  - 3 or a smaller *proportion* of their earnings in income tax

(US only)

- How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a Presidential veto?

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